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Nicaragua: Manpower Problems in an Increasingly Militarized Society

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An Intelligence Assessment

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This paper was prepared by Office of African and Latin American Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations.

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Middle America–Caribbean Division, ALA,

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Key Judgments

Information available as of 16 November 1987 was used in this report.

The expansion of Sandinista military forces—from about 5,000 guerrilla fighters in 1979 to nearly 80,000 active-duty personnel and 85,000 unmobilized reserves and militia by late 1987—has considerably strained Nicaraguan manpower resources. Although Managua has often used the anti-Sandinista insurgency to justify its military buildup, 25X1 25X1 the regime plans to expand the armed forces further after the rebels are eliminated. The government intends to keep 80,000 men on active duty through 1995 and augment its reserve forces to 420,000—out of a total population expected to grow to a little more than 4 million. This would require that every able-bodied male between the ages of 15 and 39 enter military service, either on active duty or as a reserve or militia member. 25X1

Conscription—obligating young men to two years of active duty—has provided most of the active-duty manpower in all regular branches of the armed forces since 1983. Militia units formed in rural areas play a large role in local defense against the insurgents, and reservists drawn primarily from the cities and the heavily populated Pacific coast can be called up to augment regular forces when necessary. To maintain current active-duty manpower levels with the term of service for conscripts limited to two years and that for reservists and militia limited to six months or less, the regime, according to our estimates, must recruit and train 30,000 to 35,000 men each year. When medical disqualifications, draft evasion, and other personnel losses are taken into account, we estimate that at least 60,000 men—roughly 10 percent of the draft-age male population—must be notified and processed to meet this quota. 25X1

Government recruitment efforts are constrained by demographic factors and the emigration of many military-age males to avoid the draft. After five years of war, many rural regions affected by the insurgency now are devoid of draft-age males. The local militia—on which the Sandinistas rely to defend the rural economy—have not been able to grow enough to meet the increasing threat from the guerrillas. As a result, the regime has had to send more conscripts and reservists from the Pacific coast to combat areas, thereby extending the economic and social impact of the war to the majority of the population. Desertions and casualties from the war have attrited manpower strength, and the low technical proficiency of most soldiers has further reduced their capabilities. 25X1

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The Sandinistas' ability to ensure sufficient manpower resources for the counterinsurgency in the near future will depend heavily on the outcome of the Central American peace process. If the peace plan results in the cutoff of outside assistance to the rebels and a decline in their strength and effectiveness, we believe the Sandinistas can cope with their current manpower problems. On the other hand, if the insurgency continues to grow in effectiveness—although not necessarily in size—as it has for most of 1987, we believe the combination of increasing personnel shortages, low technical proficiency, and unfavorable demographics will impose strict upper limits on the government's ability to keep pace with increasing insurgent capabilities. The regime would then have to choose between greater mobilization of manpower resources—with the attendant social and economic costs—or the adoption of a more defensive strategy leaving the insurgents in control of some areas of the country.

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We believe the Sandinistas are most likely to respond to increased rebel battlefield pressure by dispatching more reserve units, composed largely of 25- to 40-year-old males, from the Pacific coast to the war zones. Less likely alternatives would be to extend the term of service for conscripts to three years or more, to recall individual veterans in the most needed specialties, or to ask for more Cuban soldiers to fill training or technical positions or to help garrison the Pacific region so that more Nicaraguans would be free to fight the guerrillas. All of these steps would almost certainly lead to higher desertion rates, increased emigration, and greater discontent among the population.

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Even should Managua quell the insurgency, the Sandinistas plan to continue their conventional force buildup well into the next decade. The buildup will help to ensure the political control of the Sandinista Party and to deter any foreign military invasion. Nicaragua's neighbors are certain to view such a buildup as a major threat, and should it continue they are likely to seek an accommodation with Managua to promote regional arms limitations.

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of Nicaragua's armed forces since 1979 and the need for qualified individuals to man and maintain the large quantities of Soviet military equipment acquired have put considerable strains on Nicaragua's limited manpower resources. With a population of about 3.3 million, Nicaragua has nearly 80,000 active-duty military personnel and another 85,000 unmobilized reserves and militia. Only Cuba has a higher proportion of its population under arms in the Western Hemisphere.

Since 1982 the regime's need to combat a growing insurgency also has heightened demands for military manpower. Even if the insurgency were eliminated, however, the Sandinistas' plans to augment their conventional forces over the next eight years, would require a substantial supply of draft-age males to fill the ranks. Although the government thus far has managed to cope with the economic and social upheavals caused by conscription and the maintenance of a large military establishment, the planned expansion will place even greater burdens on Nicaraguan society in the coming years.

This paper examines the availability of military manpower in Nicaragua; the processes by which personnel are recruited, trained, and retained; and problems caused by demographic constraints, resistance to the draft, desertions, casualties, and lack of technical proficiency. The paper also assesses the impact of manpower constraints on the Sandinistas' future ability to counter the insurgency as well as their efforts to build an even larger conventional force structure.

Building a Force Structure

The necessity of building a large armed force was an early preoccupation of the Sandinista regime. After ousting President Somoza in mid-1979, the Sandinistas began transforming their guerrilla army of some 5,000 into a professional military to help consolidate their political power and to guard against perceived threats from abroad. The ensuing force expansion—which under various manpower plans called for active-duty strengths of 22,000 in 1983, 57,000 in late 1984, and more than 100,000 in 1987—compelled the regime to establish a system for the recruitment and training of military personnel. The first draft in Nicaragua's history was undertaken in the fall of 1983, and since then conscription for regular, reserve, and militia units has become a fact of life. We believe that poor economic conditions, government exhortations, and the promise of greater opportunities after service have stimulated some voluntary enlistments. in Nicaragua indicates, however, that most service is involuntary and those who report for duty do so reluctantly.

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Developing the Officer Corps

The Sandinistas have strived to create an officer corps that is both loyal and competent. officers frequently are recruited from the Sandinista Youth Organization and other party organs to ensure their political reliability. In addition, promising students and graduates with good educational backgrounds are offered commissions as an alternative to being drafted. Conscripts with needed skills sometimes move up into the officer ranks.

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The current officer corps—which numbers 17,882 out of a total active-duty strength of 79,584 is young but relatively experienced in counterinsurgency operations. Most of the senior officers are veterans of the guerrilla war against former President Somoza. officers have no set term of service and must remain in the armed forces until given permission to resign.

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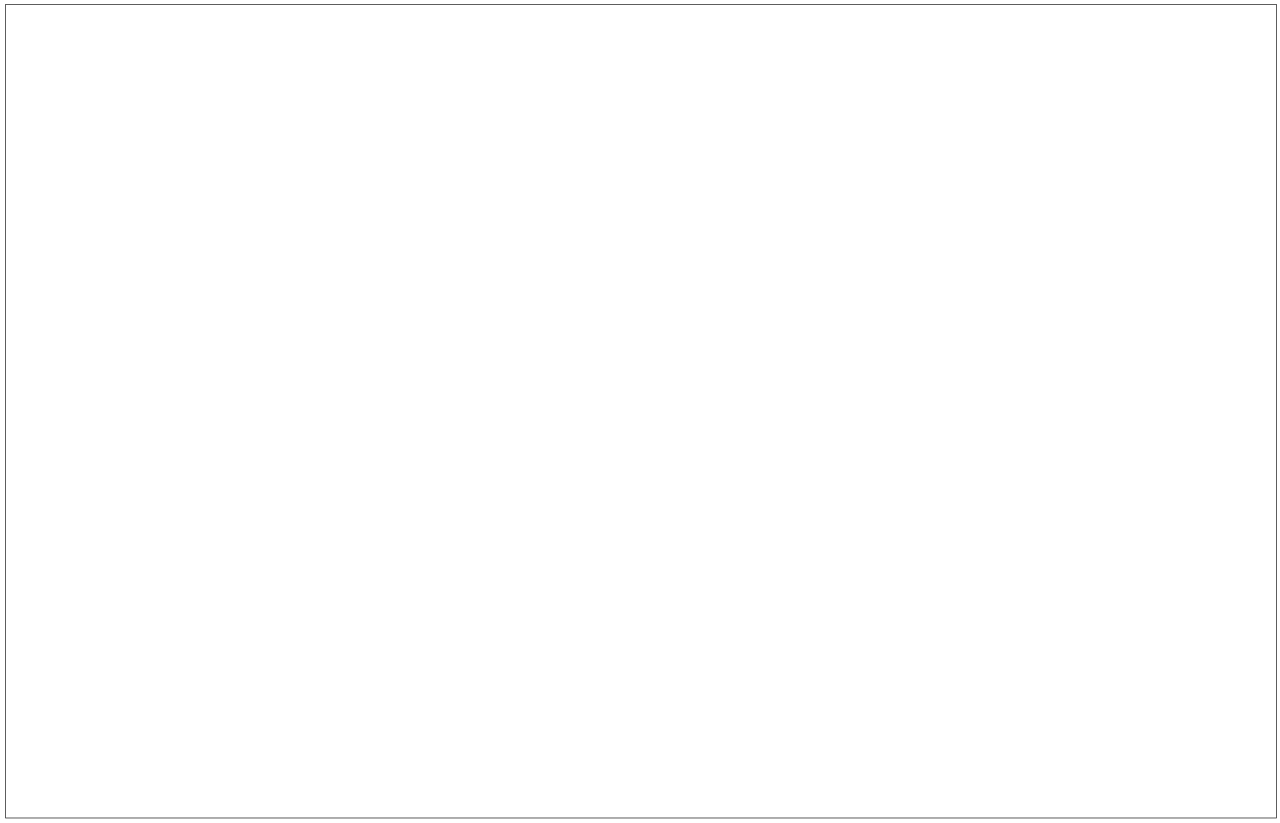

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The military rank structure reflects the relative youth of the officer corps. Although the regime adopted conventional military ranks in July 1986, Sandinista officers—with the exception of Defense Minister Humberto Ortega, who was named a four-star general—generally hold lower ranks than their counterparts in other countries. The Air and Air Defense Force chief and most military region commanders—positions commensurate with the rank of full colonel or brigadier general—are only lieutenant colonels. Lower ranks are particularly evident in the field-grade positions of battalion and brigade commander, which usually are held by majors or lieutenant colonels in most countries. as of August 1987, the armed forces had only 113 field-grade officers and 315 captains. With some 50 brigades, more than 300 battalions, and more than 100 senior staff positions to fill, the High Command appears to have designated captains to command many brigades and lieutenants to command many battalions.

Nicaragua has relied heavily on the Soviet Bloc for officer training. 25X1
some 5,700 Nicaraguan officers had been 25X1
trained in Cuba and 900 in the USSR and Eastern Europe as of October 1987, and another 1,150 were still participating in overseas training programs. 25X1
basic officer and infantry training 25X1
is conducted at the Carlos Aguero School in Managua, the former infantry school under the Somoza regime, while officers with other specialties are sent 25X1
abroad for instruction. For example, logistics and air defense officers receive 10 months of training in Cuba, while pilots, Air Force maintenance officers, and radar technicians spend up to five years in the 25X1
Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. 25X1

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Relying on Conscripts

Draftees have provided most of the manpower in all regular branches of the armed forces since military conscription was instituted in late 1983. The original impetus was the need to fill the ranks of counterinsurgency battalions, formed to confront an upsurge in rebel activity. Initially, only 18- to 24-year-old males were subject to the draft, but in 1985 conscription officially was extended to 16- to 40-year-olds. In addition, sources of the US Embassy in Managua report that some youths as young as 14 are being drafted to fill conscription quotas. Women are encouraged to volunteer for noncombat assignments so that more men can be freed for service in the field. Conscripts are assigned to counterinsurgency battalions, light-hunter battalions, border guards, the militia's permanent territorial companies, the Air and Air Defense Force, and the Interior Ministry forces.

We estimate that the regime must recruit and train some 30,000 to 35,000 men a year to maintain an active-duty strength of nearly 80,000. This takes into account a term of service for conscripts of two years and an active-duty requirement for reservists and militia of six months or less. Considering medical disqualifications, draft evasion, and other losses of personnel entering the system, we estimate that at least 60,000 persons—roughly 10 percent of all draft-age males—must be notified and processed each year.

The conscription process appears to be working relatively smoothly, according to The widespread popular opposition to the draft that flared in 1984 and 1985 has given way to resignation. Lists of individuals being called up are published in local newspapers every three to four months, and several thousand are conscripted in each cycle. Those who report and pass a medical exam—roughly 50 percent, according to press accounts and —are sent immediately to training centers. those going to counterinsurgency battalions receive six to 10 weeks of basic infantry training from Cuban and Nicaraguan instructors in training centers near the towns of Ocotal, Jinotega, and Mulukuku. Upon graduation, they are sent to combat units as replacements for veterans completing their two-year obligation. Press accounts indicate there is little overlap with the returning demobilizing veterans, and the combat efficiency of units receiving replacements probably is severely reduced for a few months. 25X1

Despite the gradual expansion of conscription efforts, conscription has 25X1
not provided enough personnel to meet the regime's planned manpower levels. The counterinsurgency battalions, for example, have dwindled in size considerably during the past three years because of relatively high casualty levels, desertion rates in some units as high as 30 percent, and a shortage of replacements. these battalions 25X1
originally had an authorized strength of 1,200 men, but they now rarely have more than 500. 25X1

The Role of the Militia

To ease its manpower problems, the regime has 25X1
supplemented its regular armed forces with local militia. Although some conscripts are placed in militia units, most militia personnel are volunteers recruited from the local population. Militia members normally serve for three to six months at a time, but they can be recalled to duty numerous times. There is no apparent age limit in the militia, and 25X1
having seen old men as well as boys between 25X1
the ages of 12 and 14 bearing arms and wearing militia uniforms. 25X1

The Sandinistas rely on militia for static defense, 25X1
thereby freeing regular forces for pursuing the rebels. Militia units formed in rural villages and agricultural cooperatives, for example, are charged with protecting 25X1
the economic and administrative targets the insurgents most frequently attack, according to press and 25X1
Militia members know the local 25X1
area and its people, and many can live at home and be called upon to defend the cooperatives where they work. In addition, they require less logistic support than regular units. 25X1

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The militia receives only rudimentary training. 25X1
Sandinista Army cadre attached
to each militia battalion provide instruction, concen- 25X1
trating primarily on defensive tasks, patrolling, logistics, and use of artillery support. 25X1

militia personnel in the northwest, where fighting has been nearly continuous for five years, exhibit considerable combat proficiency. Those in regions where guerrilla activity is rarer appear to be poorly trained and far less effective.

The Role of Reserve Forces

Like the militia, the reserves have helped the Sandinistas broaden the pool of trained military personnel while lessening the strains on the 16- to 24-year-old age group. Government leaders have publicly announced a goal of more than 200,000 trained reserves and militiamen. Reserve units, according to press and are composed of veterans who have completed two years of active-duty service, young teenagers who have not yet been conscripted, and most of the 25- to 40-year-old age group. the government finds the older men less amenable to military discipline and political indoctrination than teenagers, and thus it largely limits them to service in the reserves. US Embassy sources say regime mobilization officials move through factories and other businesses to ensure that all employees are registered with reserve units. The press regularly reminds conscripts completing their tours of duty that they are required to sign up with a reserve unit upon returning home, but many fail to do so.

Although the regime claims the reserves are primarily a defensive force designed to guard the Pacific region against a foreign invasion, they increasingly are used to supplement counterinsurgency forces. Reserve units often are called to active duty and sent to the war zones when major government offensives are under way or when rebel activity increases. According to press and reservists may remain on active duty for three months to a year. A government press story about the return of a reserve battalion to Managua after a year of fighting in southern Nicaragua highlighted the fact that service in the reserves did not exempt draft-age members of the unit from conscription for two more years on active duty.

Most reservists have had only rudimentary military training. According to the most reservists are required to attend weekend duty or train for up to 30 days on weapons familiarization and political indoctrination, but they receive little firing practice. In our judgment, reservists' participation in military operations and the growing number of demobilized veterans joining the reserves as the war drags on will gradually improve the reliability of the reserves as a fighting force.

Problems in Maintaining Manpower Levels

While use of the militia and reserves has eased regular military manpower requirements somewhat, the regime has had difficulty keeping a large enough force on active duty to cope with the growing insurgent threat over the past year. Although Nicaragua's population is relatively young and growing rapidly, several factors have combined to reduce the overall availability of manpower even as the demand for military personnel has grown.

Demographic Factors

The lack of sufficient population in the combat areas to man local militia units at full strength has proved to be a key problem for the Sandinistas. About two-thirds of the population live in the Pacific coast region, where there is no appreciable rebel presence. Nearly all of the fighting has occurred in more remote areas where the population is relatively sparse and the people less supportive of the government. Five years of guerrilla war and forced resettlement have thinned the population even further; many peasants have migrated to the cities or to Honduras and Costa Rica, and the government has forcibly relocated others. Thus the regime must draw recruits for local militias from a relatively small manpower pool in the combat zones. Many rural areas now have almost no military-age males. In December 1986, for example, military officials in some northwestern towns were unable to fulfill their recruitment quotas for reserve and militia personnel.

In our view, local militias in most combat regions cannot expand further without severely reducing agricultural production. Consequently, the regime increasingly is forced to move men from the relatively

Structure of the Sandinista Armed Forces

After coming to power in 1979, the Sandinista guerrilla force of some 5,000 combatants formed the nucleus of a large conventional army outfitted with Soviet military equipment. When gradually expanding insurgent forces appeared in both the northern and southern border regions, the regime restructured the armed forces in 1983, forming new counterinsurgency battalions, expanding regional militias, and instituting military conscription for the first time in the nation's history

These forces are divided among seven military regions, each with a military headquarters that oversees administration and logistics and serves as a regional command and control authority. The number of regular, reserve, and militia battalions located within each region depends on the size of the local population and the rebel threat.

The Army

The Army, by far the largest component of the armed forces, comprises regular infantry, armor, artillery, combat support, service support, border troops, and specialized units. Army regulars serve as the cadre for many reserve and militia units on active duty. In practice, there are two separate forces—a conventional army deployed in the Pacific coast region to defend against a foreign invasion and a counterinsurgency army fighting the rebels in the rest of the country.

most of the conventional army, including all the active armored and motorized battalions and most of the artillery, is deployed in the Pacific coast area (Military Regions 2, 3, and 4). Since this region includes Managua and the major port of Corinto, most of the national command and logistics facilities also are located here.

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Militia battalions, which perform most of the local defense missions in the rural areas of Nicaragua, are a key element of the regime's counterinsurgency strategy. Most militia battalions have a permanent territorial company that remains on active duty. Other companies mobilize personnel from the surrounding towns and collective farms when the need arises. A mobilized militia battalion usually has 150 to 300 men. In a few areas of the northwest where the fighting has been heaviest, some militia battalions appear to have been on continuous active duty for nearly five years.

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A new, more mobile type of militia unit—designated a light-hunter battalion—began to appear in early 1986. According to government press announcements, these units are composed of more experienced militiamen and are intended to pursue guerrilla forces rather than merely defend territory.

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Supporting and supplementing the militia in the war zones are border guards, artillery, regular and reserve infantry, and 12 counterinsurgency battalions. The latter units are the Sandinistas' primary pursuit force and the only troops that regularly cross military region boundaries.

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indicate the counterinsurgency battalions are composed primarily of conscripts, and we estimate each has about 500 men

The Other Services

The Sandinista Air and Air Defense Force operates the country's fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft, the antiaircraft systems, and the air-surveillance radar network. This force expanded considerably in 1986, following the delivery of 30 new helicopters and four transport aircraft and the return of scores of new pilots and technical personnel from training in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The Sandinista Navy, *The Navy mans about 20 patrol craft and a few coastal minesweepers and converted fishing boats. It also has an underwater demolition unit that may be manned by both Cuban and Nicaraguan personnel.*

The Sandinista Interior Ministry *fields a number of special-forces companies* *in conjunction with Army troops and border guards. These personnel wear uniforms and use the same military ranks as the Army through the level of captain*

quiet Pacific coast region to more remote combat areas in the interior. For example, several hundred reservists and militia personnel from the Ocotal area—where fighting was slack in late 1986—were transferred to counterinsurgency battalions farther east. On occasion, such moves of personnel have sparked public protests against the regime. According to US Embassy and public demonstrations in Rama and Boaco last June protested the sending of reservists from their hometowns to the war zones.

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Draft Evasion

Meeting recruitment quotas also is made difficult by poor economic conditions and the unwillingness of many young men to serve. many draft-age males have fled the country, gone into hiding, or joined the rebels. Statistics evaluated by the US Census Bureau indicate that more than 13,000 males between 15 and 39 years old left Nicaragua in 1985. We believe a similar number have departed each year since then, both to evade the draft and to seek better economic opportunities. Figures reported by US Embassies in Central America and Immigration and Naturalization Service officials in the United States suggest that 450,000 to 600,000 Nicaraguans—15 to 20 percent of the population—are living abroad. Those unable to obtain visas or afford air fare simply flee to Honduras or Costa Rica. Occasional reporting indicates that others go into hiding or join the rebels, but statistics are not available.

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To discourage draft evasion, the Sandinistas have used social and economic coercion and other forms of pressure with varying degrees of effectiveness. US Embassy sources claim local block committees regularly report the whereabouts of teenage males living in their neighborhoods and threaten families with the loss of ration cards if their sons evade the draft. During callups, the government-controlled press frequently reminds young men they face imprisonment for failure to report and highlights stories of grief-stricken families betrayed by smugglers hired to take their sons to Honduras or Costa Rica. The Sandinista Navy is authorized to search for and capture draft evaders and deserters, and sources of that government officials remove motors from many fishing boats on the Atlantic coast during callups to hinder escape by sea.

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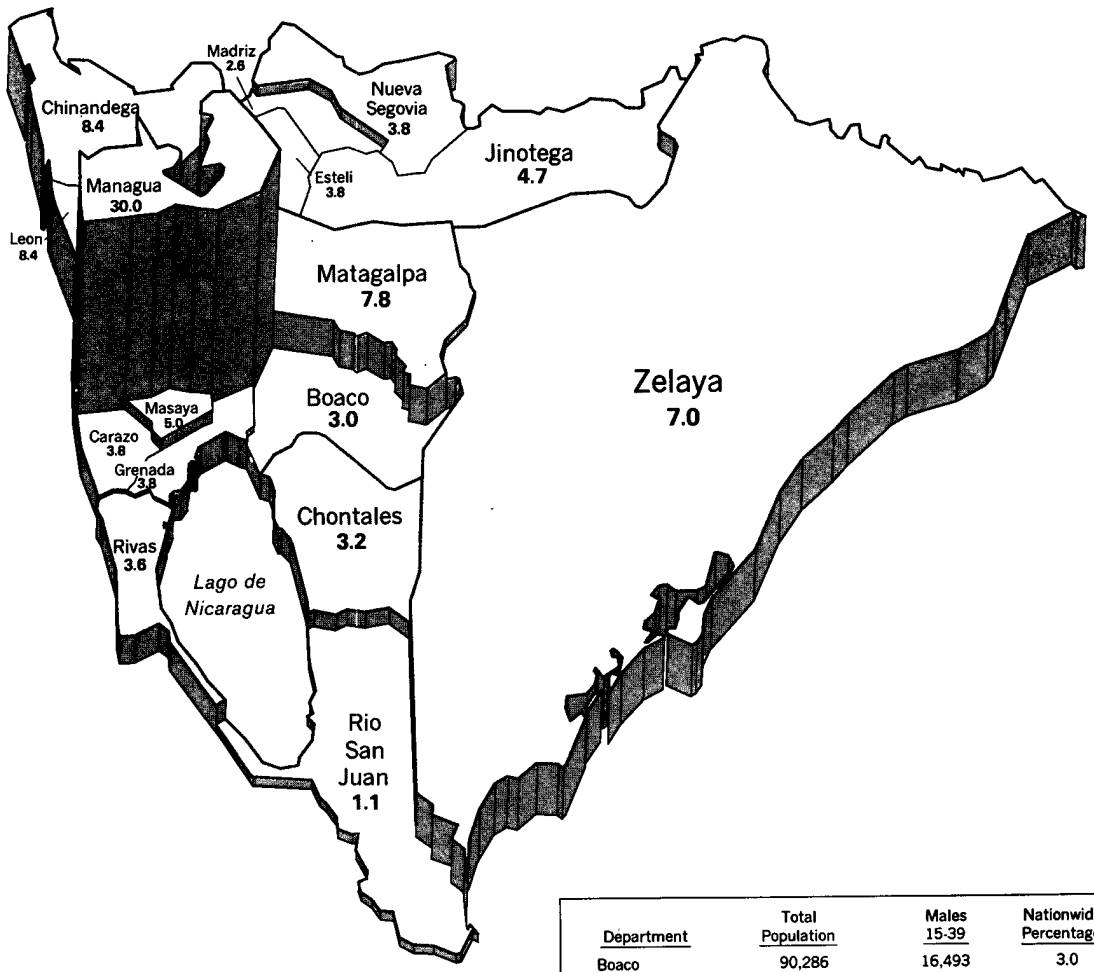
Figure 2
Nicaragua: Distribution of Draft-Age Males, 1982 [a]



Department	Total Population	Males 15-39	Nationwide Percentage
Boaco	90,286	16,493	3.0
Carazo	111,619	20,751	3.8
Chinandega	236,689	46,228	8.4
Chontales	100,157	17,623	3.2
Esteli	113,677	20,846	3.8
Grenada	115,670	20,798	3.8
Jinotega	131,290	25,793	4.7
Leon	253,657	46,703	8.4
Madriz	74,313	14,410	2.6
Managua	858,862	166,140	30.0
Masaya	151,909	27,797	5.0
Matagalpa	223,639	43,039	7.8
Nueva Segovia	102,262	20,854	3.8
Rio San Juan	30,219	6,308	1.1
Rivas	112,030	19,832	3.6
Zelaya	211,290	38,807	7.0
TOTAL	2,917,811	552,422	

Department with little or no fighting since 1985

[a] Data are from official Nicaraguan sources; 1982 figures reflect population distribution before most effects of the war such as migration from rural areas to the Pacific Coast and exodus of draft-age males took effect. Subsequent statistics published by the Sandinista government do not accurately reflect those trends and are considered to be unreliable. We estimate the total draft-age male population in 1987 at 600,000 to 620,000.

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Desertions

Some of the young men who do not flee to avoid induction desert afterward, especially from units in areas of insurgent activity. Desertion rates of 15 percent have been noted frequently by many military units, and occasionally desertions have reached as high as 30 percent. Desertions from training camps and troop units in the war zones usually increase shortly after new inductees arrive. In early 1987, for example, conscript units in the 1st Military Region—where the insurgents have been increasingly active—reported more than 200 desertions out of a total strength of 1,300.

The fate of deserters varies. Many return to their homes, according to the US Embassy, where they are subject to arrest, imprisonment, or reinduction. Other deserters have joined the rebels, bringing all their military equipment with them. Still others—probably the largest group—seek exile in Honduras or Costa Rica or attempt to hide out in the countryside.

Casualties

Combat losses further drain Sandinista manpower resources, and heavier fighting in recent months has pushed casualties higher. 4,943 government soldiers had been killed since the conflict began in 1981—1,074 of them in 1987 alone. Another 8,166 have been wounded and 1,048 are reported missing for total casualties of over 14,000 as of October 1987.

In our view, the Sandinista practice of replacing up to half of a unit's personnel with inexperienced troops at one time has contributed to the high casualty rates. A source of the US Embassy in Managua cited the example of a friend's son who was conscripted, assigned to a counterinsurgency battalion, wounded, and sent to the hospital in Jinotega in mid-1986. The young man claimed that inexperienced conscripts were easily ambushed by the rebels and that all the hospitals in the war zones were badly overcrowded.

Difficulties in Assimilating Modern Equipment

In addition to problems in recruiting and retaining military personnel, the regime is constrained by the low technical proficiency of most Nicaraguan soldiers, which limits the ability of the armed forces to operate and maintain modern equipment. Generally low educational levels and a lack of technical skills are characteristic of most of the population of Nicaragua. Despite advances in elementary education since the revolution, much of the rural population remains illiterate Sandinista military officials attempting in October 1986 to fill 100 military training positions for future officers in East Germany could find only 60 candidates with the requisite educational background

The problem has been made worse by the exodus of many of the most highly skilled and educated members of the population engineers, skilled mechanics, and talented managers are almost impossible to find, hire, or retain in any government office or private enterprise. Moreover, the lack of sufficient personnel with the aptitude to learn technical skills has been further aggravated by the practice of drafting students well before they complete high school.

Difficulties in assimilating new Soviet equipment because of low technical skills probably are most prevalent in the Air and Air Defense Force, which plays a critical logistic and combat support role in the counterinsurgency. low morale, lack of sufficient training, poor working conditions, and a shortage of personnel due to desertions contributed to frequent equipment breakdowns. Although dozens of Nicaraguan radar technicians trained in the USSR and Eastern Europe returned in late 1985, the performance of the air surveillance system has remained poor. Cuban

In the Air Force, the inexperience of Nicaraguan pilots and maintenance crews has forced the regime to rely heavily on foreign advisers and technicians.

most Nicaraguan aircraft technicians are poorly trained and that all but the simplest maintenance and repair work has to be done by Soviets in Nicaragua. Even so, the Air Force has had difficulty keeping more than about half of its 10 MI-25 helicopter gunships in service because of maintenance difficulties.

The lack of technical expertise also is obvious in the ground forces, where Nicaraguan soldiers appear to have little difficulty learning to employ basic infantry weapons and small-unit tactics but have shown considerable deficiencies in command and control, logistics management, and the operation and maintenance of more complex machinery. Poor communications and a lack of coordination sometimes have resulted in botched operations, artillery fire missing its target by several miles, aircraft bombing friendly troops, ground forces shooting down their own aircraft, and border guards walking into their own minefields. most of the Soviet-made light tanks and armored reconnaissance vehicles were rendered unserviceable because poorly trained drivers continually overheated the engines and burned out the clutches. Maintenance personnel lacked both the skills and the spare parts to repair the vehicles, which had to be sent back to Managua. Sources of the US Embassy report that many truck drivers also are poorly trained and frequently wreck their vehicles or ruin them through lack of maintenance logistics officer estimated the average service life of a truck in the Sandinista Army to be four months

Outlook

the Sandinistas plan to continue expanding the size of their armed forces during the next eight years regardless of the outcome of the Central American peace process. the regime wants to maintain a total active-duty strength of 100,000 until the insurgency is defeated and a strength of 80,000 regulars and up to 420,000 reserves and militia thereafter. If these plans are carried out, they eventually would require the arming of nearly every able-bodied male between 15 and 39.

Impact on the Counterinsurgency

In the short-term—especially if the Central American peace plan results in the cutoff of outside military assistance to the insurgents and rebel forces decline in strength and effectiveness—the Sandinistas probably could cope with their manpower problems. The regime has not been seriously constrained thus far—it has been able to release personnel on time, shift conscripts, reserves, and militia to meet its most pressing needs, and cushion the impact of drafting older males by assigning most of them to the reserves in the quiet Pacific region. Although problems such as draft evasion and desertions are likely to persist, most of the Nicaraguan population probably will continue to comply with conscription.

A continuation of the high level of fighting in several regions that characterized the war during most of 1987, however, would increase demands for personnel and leave the Sandinistas vulnerable to a long-term rural guerrilla war strategy. If the rebels broaden the geographic scope of the war and increase their military pressure, the Sandinistas would face uncomfortable decisions that could cost them a considerable amount of social and economic disruption. Managua would be forced to redeploy even more reserve units from the Pacific coast or adopt a defensive strategy that would leave the rebels in control of some remote areas. Using more reserves to fight the rebels would involve many 25- to 40-year-old men in combat, a move almost certain to increase popular discontent in the cities and lead to an even greater economic dislocation and exodus from the country. Failing to confront the rebels wherever they are found, however, would risk losing momentum and allowing the insurgents to set up supply networks in temporary liberated areas that would increase their staying power.

Some steps are available to the regime to overcome personnel shortages, but each comes with a high political or social cost. The most likely, in our view, would be to extend the term of service for conscripts to three or more years to reduce the loss of experienced personnel and lessen the need to call up as many reservists. Such a move would have added benefits because it would increase the combat efficiency of existing units and reduce the disruption of rotating nearly half of the troops every year. Desertions almost certainly would increase, however, as many conscripts held over from their scheduled release would consider that the regime had broken its promise. Draft evasion and flight from the country also would rise, because many of those who otherwise might submit to a two-year draft would not want to serve longer. Vocal public protests against the draft, which largely died down in 1985 when the first two-year conscripts were released on time, might recur.

A second alternative would be to recall many of the reservists who have completed their service obligations for a second two-year tour. Cuba has used this method to fill its manpower needs in Angola since the late 1970s. Like the option of extending the tour of duty, this solution would provide the armed forces with more experienced and well-trained manpower but undoubtedly would cause morale and discipline problems among the recalled troops.

A more unlikely alternative would be to appeal to Havana for Cuban soldiers—either to fill key technical and training posts or to help garrison the Pacific coast, thus freeing more Nicaraguans for combat. Most Cuban troops in Angola perform similar missions. Cuban President Castro had informed the Sandinistas he would not send troop units to Nicaragua, presumably because of direct US demands to Cuba against such an action. We believe Castro would want to avoid provoking the United States and other countries in the region. Havana might be willing to send more military advisers and technical personnel, however, to help improve the performance and training of the Sandinista forces.

Implications of a Conventional Force Buildup

Containment or total defeat of the insurgency would not significantly lessen Sandinista military manpower requirements, 25X1 After the insurgency is reduced to a minimum—by 1990, according to government plans—the regime intends to resume a buildup of conventional forces. Sandinista plans call for the creation of 100 additional reserve infantry battalions in the Pacific region during the next three years and the elimination of about half of the counter-insurgency battalions based in rural areas after 1990. the regime has requested arms, uniforms, and other supplies from the Soviet Union to equip the new units. Increased conventional armaments—tanks, armored personnel carriers, self-propelled artillery, mobile surface-to-air missile systems, and MIG fighter aircraft—also have been requested.

Reserve forces apparently will make up the bulk of the planned force expansion. Some 20,000 to 30,000 two-year conscripts—about two-thirds of whom live in the Pacific region—are released from active duty each year and could be assigned to reserve units near their homes. The rest of the new units' personnel presumably will be composed of 25- to 40-year-olds with only a few weeks training. A portion of the 80,000-man active duty force probably would form the cadre of the new reserve units and provide the increased manpower needed to maintain new Soviet equipment and train reservists in its use.

In our view, the goal of 500,000 regular, reserve, and militia troops in 1995 is unrealistic and would require conscription at current levels for the next eight years, a move likely to be resisted by much of the population. Economic difficulties caused by the diversion of scarce resources to the military would persist, and heavy emigration from the country to avoid the draft would continue to create border tensions. Technically sophisticated military equipment like jet fighters and radar directed surface-to-air missiles would be even more difficult for Nicaraguans to operate and would increase their reliance on Soviet Bloc technicians and advisers.

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Nevertheless, a large defense force presumably would help the Sandinistas maintain internal control and deter any US or other foreign military threat to Nicaragua. Defense Minister Humberto Ortega publicly maintains that the regime's planned buildup is defensive—designed to protect the populated Pacific region from a foreign invasion—and that defending the revolution is the duty of every citizen. Nevertheless, Nicaragua's neighbors are certain to view such a conventional force buildup as a major threat, and, should it continue, they are likely to seek a political accommodation with Managua to promote a regional arms limitation agreement.

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